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| **The Perfect Swim** by S. L. Rottman |
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I went over to a corner of the locker room and wedged myself into it. I forced myself to start taking deep breaths, and finally I began to relax.

Dimly, in the back of my mind, I could hear Coach talking. I stopped listening after he said my name for the 200 free. I put my head down on my knees and envisioned myself on the blocks. While Coach went through the rest of the lineup changes, I went through my race in my mind.

“Skye?”

I looked up into Christie’s face.

“Come on, time to go do our cheer.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah.”

Usually I didn’t miss the swim team cheer, no matter what. But I had just gotten myself focused on my race, and if I went out there, I would lose my concentration. So I stayed where I was. I could hear the cheers, both ours and the opposing team’s. I heard the national anthem, and then I heard the start of the first relay. Mentally I went through my race one more time, and then I headed out to the deck.

I walked up to Coach to get my card.

“Where have you been?” he demanded. “I almost put Christie in for you.”

“In the locker room,” I said.

He looked at me skeptically, but there must have been something in my tone or the look on my face that stopped him from saying anything else. He simply handed me my card and wished me luck. That was all. No drilling on race plan or technique. He could tell I was ready.

I left my towel with the rest of my stuff on the deck and walked over to the starting blocks. Stretching out was part of my routine, and all the moves were light and easy. I had only been out of the water for ten minutes, so I was still loose and limber. I handed my card to the timer. I paced back and forth behind my lane three times.

I planted my feet and rolled my shoulders, letting my arms and hands dangle and jiggle limply at my side. With my chin on my chest, looking directly at the ground, breathing deeply, I was able to focus completely on the race at hand. The noise from the other swimmers and spectators was a dim background rumble.

The whistle blew. “Event number two, step up on the blocks.”

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Every word the announcer said was crisp and clear in my mind. I was finely tuned—seeing, hearing, feeling everything; yet seeing, hearing, feeling nothing but the upcoming race.

“Take your mark.” The buzzer sounded. I exploded off the block, arching high. I felt the strength in my arms, legs, back. I could feel the energy all the way down to my toes as I pointed them, aiming for the perfect streamline. I hit the water, slicing down through it and then quickly popping back up to settle into my stroke.

At the end of the first length, I could tell I was starting at a faster pace than I had ever swum before. In the middle of my turn, I considered briefly holding back just a little, thinking I was pushing myself with the fast pace and have nothing to finish with. As I took the first stroke off the turn, however, I knew I couldn’t hold back. My mind and body were geared for this pace, and I would not drop back from it

I blocked the other swimmers out of my mind. I didn’t care where they were. If they were up in front or behind me, it didn’t matter. I didn’t see the crowd in the stands when I turned my head to breathe; all I saw was a blur. I was swimming my race, looking for a state qualifying time.

My legs began to burn when I was only halfway through the race. For a moment I faltered, afraid that I couldn’t keep the pace. Then I tucked my head down and shifted my arms into overdrive. I would keep the pace. That was all there was to it.

The last fifty was pain. Pure, simple, uncomplicated pain. My legs were on fire, my lungs were ready to burst, my arms felt like lead being dragged through the water. Yet I don’t think I could have stopped moving. That last lap felt like it took forever. For the first time, I allowed myself to look and see where my competition was. I couldn’t see any of them. When I finished, I had no idea if I was in front of the field or behind it.

I touched the wall, and I couldn’t even stand up. I leaned back instead, floating in the water, feeling every blood vessel in my body pounding, trying to get oxygen to my body. My ears were underwater so I could barely hear the cheers of the spectators. They seemed louder than usual. I stood up and looked at my coach and teammates.

Almost everyone was jumping up and down alongside the pool. I started to smile uncertainly. I looked at my timer. She had been waiting for me to look at her.

Her grin was huge. “2:04.67.”

My jaw dropped. “Really?”

She nodded.

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I jumped about three feet out of the water, throwing my arms in the air. *I did it! I qualified for state!* Suddenly, I wasn’t tired. There was no pain. I was dancing through the water, shouting. I pulled myself up out of the pool and onto the deck, and immediately I was surrounded by friends and teammates, being hugged and congratulated on all sides. Coach actually left his position at the side of the pool and gave me a pat on the back while shaking my hand.

I had never felt so good. The whole world was in the palm of my hand.

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